

Larry Portzline

Dr. Thomas

Humanities 515: Art History

May 6, 1999

**The Poster as Subsidized Fine Art:  
An Overview of the Federal Art Project's Poster Division,  
Its History, Influences, and Output**

When Franklin Delano Roosevelt became president in 1933, he inherited a ruined national economy and a devastated workforce which included 15 million unemployed Americans.

Among these out-of-work citizens were thousands of artists, actors, musicians, and writers who resided in virtually every region of the United States.

Roosevelt's famous "New Deal" for the country in the midst of the Depression included a proposal for a "public employment program that would provide work for three and a half million able-bodied, but jobless, men, and women" (DeHart-Mathews 8). His idea was to eliminate relief programs that had simply handed over money to those in need, and instead put Americans back to work by hiring them for public projects.

In 1935, Roosevelt founded the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to accomplish this goal. Controversial from the start, it was based on the "novel proposal that the unemployed deserved socially useful jobs rather than the humiliation of handouts and bread lines" (DeHart-Mathews vii).

Of the \$5 billion Congress invested in the WPA -- most of which was devoted to countless infrastructure and construction projects all across the nation -- less than 1 percent was devoted to the arts. This modest fraction of the WPA budget was used to create Federal Project Number One, known commonly as “Federal One.” It would serve as the umbrella organization for four autonomous arts agencies under the WPA: the Federal Art Project, the Federal Theatre Project, the Federal Music Project, and the Federal Writers’ Project.

Because it differed so drastically from the more utilitarian projects that were undertaken by Roosevelt’s new agency, Federal One quickly became known as the “white collar division of the WPA” (J. O’Connor and Brown 2). Within its first year of existence, this unique union between government and the arts employed more than 40,000 previously out-of-work individuals.

Visual artists such as painters, sculptors, graphic artists, and photographers, who had never been considered “a necessary part of the American workforce,” were overjoyed to have an opportunity to practice their crafts thanks to the Federal Art Project. Its primary purpose, like that of the other agencies in Federal One, was to unite the artists, provide them with a wage, and disseminate their work to the American public. Its decidedly democratic philosophy was that “the spiritual and aesthetic pleasures of art, rather than being reserved for an educated elite, should be available to the widest possible numbers of people” (DeNoon 13-16).

Shortly after its inception, the FAP became the nation’s largest employer of artists. It provided jobs for over 5,000 workers at its peak in 1936 and as many as 10,000 during its entire eight-year existence. Some of these individuals were established, even prominent artists, but most were young and unknown. Their output during the FAP’s existence included 100,000 easel

paintings, 18,000 sculptures, over 13,000 prints, more than 4,000 public murals, and countless photographs and posters (Park and Markowitz 5).

Most of the artists, whose salaries were only \$21 to \$27 per week, considered their association with the FAP a “rich and satisfying experience.” The agency permitted creative freedom -- including a great deal of experimentation -- and “fostered a real sense of community.” Holger Cahill, who was appointed by Roosevelt to direct the FAP, saw the project as an opportunity to create “the context for a cultural revolution,” and embraced the “importance of an integration between the fine arts and the practical arts.” For him, the idea was to create a program “open to the artistic ‘everyman’ ” (F. O’Connor, *Art for the Millions* 16-18).

With that in mind, in addition to providing work for “fine artists” such as easel painters, muralists, and sculptors, the FAP also made the “practical arts” an integral part of its mission. In fact, when the FAP created a Poster Division to employ out-of-work commercial and graphic artists, it “unwittingly launched a movement to improve the commercial poster and raise it to a true art form” (Floethe 177).

The Poster Division’s primary function as a branch of the WPA was to create informational pieces for public buildings, schools, community centers, and public transportation; to publicize plays, concerts, and lectures; and to educate citizens about health-care issues and services.

In spite of the posters’ mere functionality, the artistic quality of the work was so outstanding that demand for them grew tremendously. Their first rate appearance and low cost attracted the attention of a wide variety of organizations and government agencies, including city, state, and federal health departments, the U.S. Post Office, zoos, parks, and art associations -- all of which used the posters and their messages to their full advantage.

In four years, the division printed a total of nearly 602,000 pieces. These figures belie the fact that prior to the FAP, poster designing was largely considered an “inferior and commercial-minded” occupation in the U.S. Generally relegated to circuses, cigarettes, travel and propaganda, posters had been a fixture in America for well over a century, but rarely crossed over into the realm of artistic endeavor. Nevertheless, the poster artists of the FAP saw the “great possibility for an artistic form and were eager to try their skill.” Their work broke new ground, and as a result was no longer a “mere announcement” for the purposes of “sales promotion” (Floethe 177).

The poster as fine art was not a 20th century invention, however. European artists had been practicing the form for decades -- the most celebrated among them, Henri Toulouse-Lautrec. What was essentially a French innovation to begin with was brought to new heights by Lautrec and others in the late 1800s. Their work, which often promoted Parisian cabarets and celebrities, was characterized by its “audacity, chic, abandon, and cheer cleverness.” Lautrec’s posters in particular, which were heavily influenced by the flat colors and bold outlines of Japanese prints, were known for their “odd caricatures of the leading favorites of contemporary fame,” including “La Goulue,” a popular dancer at the Moulin Rouge (Price 33-48).

Another notable poster artist of the late 19th century was Aubrey Beardsley, an Englishman who had a “marked passion for melancholy and weird effects in black and white.” His “grotesque parodies [and] weird contortions” had a “lurid and bizarre effect,” pre-dating the Surrealists of the near future (Price 61-62).

Arguably the most famous American poster artist was Maxfield Parrish, whose work in the early 20th century included numerous posters for magazines and publishing companies. His

detailed, Art Nouveau- and Japanese-influenced posters were “quaintly elaborate,” with “intricate plays of light, shade and shadow . . .” (Price 146).

The poster artists who worked for the FAP during the Depression were a melting pot of these influences as well as a wide variety of newer movements and techniques, including the sleek elegance of Art Deco; the utilitarian look of the Bauhaus; the juxtaposition of Constructivism; the geometric shapes of Cubism; the unsettling images of Surrealism; and others. These “stylistic experimentations” gave the poster artists a foundation to develop a form that went beyond “mere derivation” and allowed them to create “a fresh style that was uniquely American” (Heimann 108-109).

Part of this American style was a socially-orientated movement called “Social Surrealism.” Influenced by the dreamscapes of Salvador Dali and others, the poster artists often used this form to “broaden the scope and impact of their social commentaries.” This was, after all, the Depression, and much of what the artists conveyed through their work reflected the despair and nightmarish poverty that gripped the nation (F. O’Connor, *Art for the Millions* 23)

Because the posters were small, mostly around 22 by 14 inches, they had inherent limitations. “Stylization and simplicity” were crucial, therefore new techniques had to be created to accommodate the intended message; for example, reducing images to their geometric simplicity and using shadows to create naturalism. Because of these limitations, the directors of the poster units encouraged experimentation, and the artists jumped at the chance to put their diversity to work (Heimann 109-10).

Other factors that helped to integrate modern art techniques into the graphic arts were the development of mass communication (thanks in large part to the propaganda posters of World

War I), the increasing influence of advertising, and the ability to mass-produce posters cheaply thanks to modern printing innovations.

One such innovation was the silk screening process pioneered by FAP artist Anthony Velonis. Velonis was the first to treat silk screening as more than a commercial art process, coining the term “serigraph” -- meaning “silk drawing” -- to distinguish it as a fine art.

The serigraph was a perfect fit for the posters, which were meant to be eye-catching, colorful, and bold, with a message that was quickly communicated. Thanks to Velonis’s simple and inexpensive process, as many as 600 posters could be printed in one day (DeNoon 18-20). [The same process was later employed by the Pop artists of the 1950s and 60s, including the most renowned silk screen artist of the 20th century, Andy Warhol.]

More important than the division’s output, however, was the posters’ quality, which the artists were determined to protect despite their mass production. The artists soon found themselves contributing to “a new golden age because they were bringing the high aesthetic standards of fine art to poster design -- and getting noticed for it” (DeNoon 23). The posters “exposed the public to sophisticated art applied to the commonplace,” and even “paved the way for public acceptance of abstract art” (Heimann 111).

As one writer noted in a 1938 magazine article:

Professional scorn, entertained generally by the ‘fine’ artist, seems to have been swept away completely by the constant barrage of good posters turned out by the WPA Federal Art Project . . . . Proof of the esteem accorded these posters lies in the enthusiastic comments of professional artists, the press and the general public . . . . The community value of these posters is inestimable, and the standard of

taste, to say nothing of the requirements in poster design and printing, have been praised by both public and artist. (Kellner 178)

The poster artists of the FAP had succeeded in raising their work “to the status of a true art form” (Kellner 178). Ironically, the practical requirements of their employer presented unique programmatic challenges due to countless requests for posters on such disparate topics as education, fire prevention, and the treatment of syphilis. The latter was a primary concern of public health agencies at that time, so in spite of the sensitive nature of the subject, the poster artists were successful in creating some of their most effective designs to address it (McKinzie 132; DeNoon 28).

One of the most visible and most acclaimed categories of FAP poster, however, was the agency’s advertisements for productions by the Federal Theatre Project.

The FTP was a sister agency of the Federal Art Project under the Federal One program, supporting thousands of unemployed actors, musicians and stagehands. President and Mrs. Roosevelt had supported the idea of a “national theatre” that would provide these individuals with work, not just in the larger cities where the theatre had thrived before the Depression, but also in rural areas where citizens had never seen live performances (McDonald 496).

This “free, adult, uncensored” theatre, as WPA Director Harry Hopkins envisioned it, employed 13,000 people in 31 states over its history, creating over 2,700 productions, including legitimate plays, touring companies, children’s theatre, radio theatre, marionette theatre and vaudeville (J. O’Connor and Brown 2).

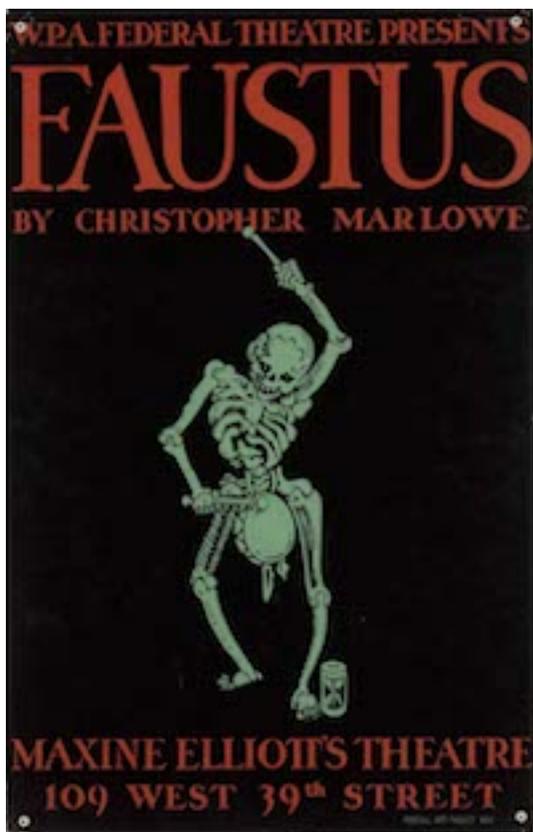
Among the FTP’s many actors, directors and playwrights were some well-known talents, as well as great many rising stars such as Joseph Cotten, John Houseman, John Huston, Burt

Lancaster, Sidney Lumet, Arthur Miller, Clifford Odets, Paul Robeson, and Orson Welles (DeNoon 57).

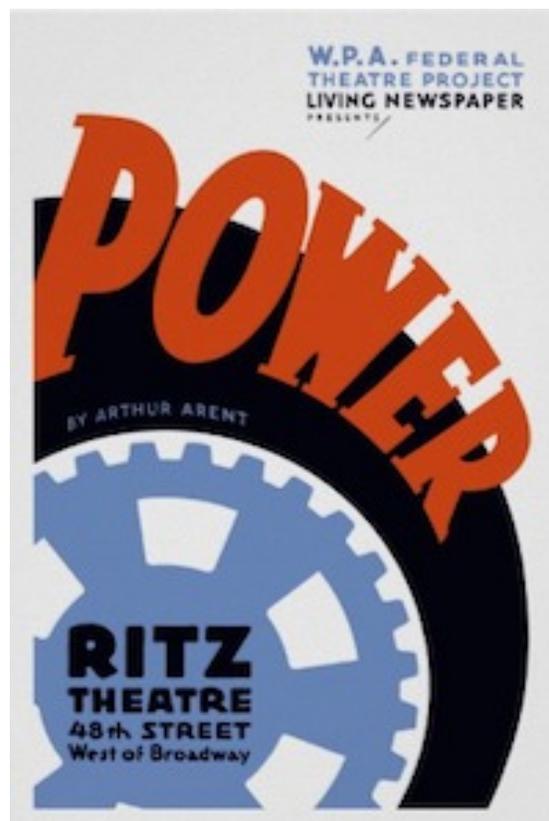
The FTP had no advertising budget at first, but like other government agencies which had quickly become aware of the phenomenal success of the FAP, it opted to utilize these inexpensive, high quality posters to publicize its productions (Whitman 61).

Collaborating with the FTP's producers, directors and playwrights, the FAP artists turned out thousands of colorful, dramatic poster designs to advertise a wide range of productions, from the largest theatres on Broadway to the smallest tent productions in middle America.

Some of the more famous and infamous FTP productions that the FAP Poster Divisions helped to publicize included the following:



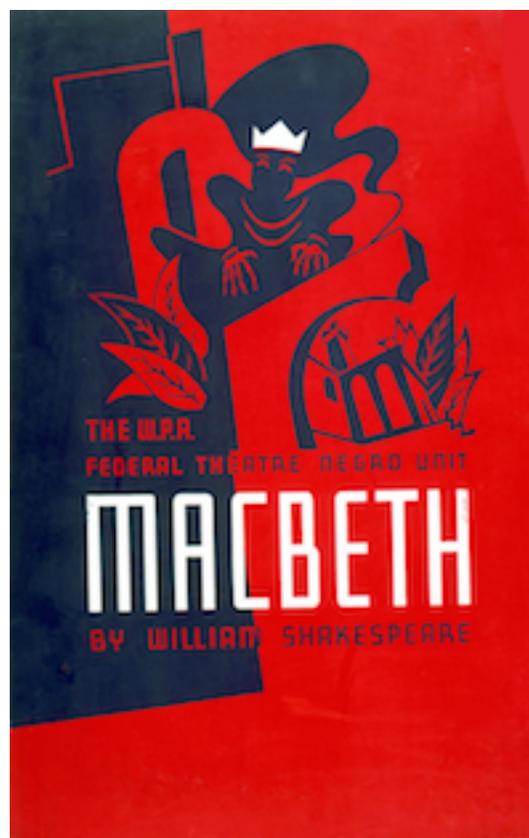
"Doctor Faustus" by Christopher Marlowe, which played to full houses in New York for most of 1937 (J. O'Connor and Brown 49).



"Power," an original "Living Newspaper" production which was a "frank plea for public ownership of the sources of power" (McDonald 534).



“The Swing Mikado,” an African American jazz version of the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta which played in Chicago in 1938 and 1939. It was by the far the FTP’s most successful production, and was socially significant because it was presented by the theatre’s “negro unit” (McDonald 536).



“Voodoo Macbeth,” an adaptation of the Shakespeare play set in Haiti and produced in New York by two of the FTP’s more renowned artists, Orson Welles and John Houseman (J. O’Connor and Brown 27).

The posters played a large role in the plays’ successes, helping to spread the word about the productions, convey something about them, and -- through their own artistic quality -- calling attention to the excellence one could expect from an FTP presentation.

Unfortunately, the intrinsic qualities that set the FAP and FTP apart from many other large-scale artistic endeavors -- their creative freedom, their innovation, and their lack of censorship -- were the very things that caused their downfall.

Because these were federally-subsidized art programs, many citizens and politicians considered them a “boondoggle,” the derogatory Depression-era term for anything that was

viewed as a waste of taxpayer money. The programs were accused of extravagance, bureaucracy, subversive activity and radical politics -- including Communist sympathies -- and as a result, many of the officials who ran the arts agencies were called to Congress in the late 1930s to testify before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. [It was a scene that would be replayed a little more than a decade later during the McCarthy era.]

Congressman Dewey Short, during a House debate on the merits of the federal arts projects, said that good art comes from suffering artists, while “subsidized art is no art at all” (McKinzie 154).

Ostensibly as a cost-cutting measure in 1939, the Federal Theatre Project was legislated out of existence, and the Federal Art Project was renamed the WPA Art Program and put under state and local control. It was eventually absorbed by the Defense Department in 1942, where its artists were put to work creating propaganda for the war effort and advertisements for citizens to “Buy Bonds” (DeNoon 31).

In 1943, the WPA was phased out altogether.

When the FAP ended, many of the poster artists used the skills they had acquired in the Poster Division’s printmaking workshops to continue the development of the graphic arts as a fine art form. Many joined college art faculties all over the country and helped to create new printmaking departments, bringing a fresh approach to their craft and sharing it with budding artists (Kainen 175).

Tragically, the work of the Poster Division was largely forgotten after World War II, and there was no real attempt to preserve or catalog the posters until recently. As a result, only about 2,000 examples out of 35,000 designs and hundreds of thousands of pieces survive today. Posters have been found over the years in a variety of locations, including government

warehouses, storage rooms at the Library of Congress, and at various historical societies and public libraries throughout the country. Many of the posters are now located at the Library of Congress and at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, which has become a repository for the history of the FTP (DeNoon 32-33).

Poster artist Anthony Velonis, whose prolific output for the FAP included the poster for the Welles-Houseman production of “Voodoo Macbeth,” lamented the disappearance of so many of his division’s works. He remarked in the book *Posters of the WPA*:

It was good to know your work went somewhere, gracing the walls of some public building. It gave you purpose and helped out a faltering self-esteem. It was not until years later you learned there was excess production and that, sadly, most of the work was eventually junked (Velonis 73).

Noted art historian Francis V. O’Connor may have summed it up best when he said that the posters were “doomed by their topicality to survive by accident” (F. O’Connor, *Posters of the WPA* 7).

Despite being overlooked for many years, and despite their undeserved reputation as “boondoggle art,” the posters are now being studied and written about extensively by art historians who have rediscovered their place in our national heritage. A fitting tribute, given that the artists’ “consistently excellent design and workmanship” (DeNoon 35) allowed them to search for “forms and symbols and allegories which [revealed] the character of American life and the American people” (Cahill 44).

In the words of O’Connor, the posters “represent the best of that impulse of the era in general, and the WPA Federal Art Project in particular, to integrate the fine and the practical arts” (F. O’Connor, *Posters of the WPA* 9).

### Works Cited

- Cahill, Holger. "American Resources in the Arts." Dedication of James Michael Newell's murals, Evander Childs High School, Bronx, New York, Nov. 1938. Art for the Millions, 33-44.
- DeHart-Mathews, Jane. The Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: Plays, Relief and Politics. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967.
- DeNoon, Christopher. Posters of the WPA. Los Angeles: Wheatley Press, 1987.
- Floethe, Richard. "Posters." Art for the Millions, 177-178.
- Heimann, Jim. "A Design Perspective." Posters of the WPA, 108-111.
- Kainen, Jacob. "The Graphic Arts Division of the WPA Federal Art Project." The New Deal Art Projects, 155-176.
- Kellner, Sydney. Article. Signs of the Times, April 1938. Art for the Millions, 177-178.
- McDonald, William F. Federal Relief Administration and the Arts: The Origins and Administrative History of the Arts Projects of the Works Progress Administration. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1969.
- McKinzie, Richard D. The New Deal for Artists. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973.
- O'Connor, Francis V., ed. Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project. Greenwich, CN: New York Graphic Society Ltd., 1973.
- O'Connor, Francis V. Introduction. Posters of the WPA. DeNoon 7-10.
- O'Connor, John and Lorraine Brown. Free, Adult, Uncensored: The Living History of the Federal Theatre Project. Washington: New Republic Books, 1978.

Park, Marlene and Gerald E. Markowitz. Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984.

Price, Charles Matlack. Poster Design: A Critical Study of the Development of the Poster in Continental Europe, England and America. George W. Bricka: New York, 1922.

Velonis, Anthony. "A Remembrance of the WPA." Posters of the WPA, 72-79.

Whitman, Willson. Bread & Circuses: A Study of the Federal Theatre. New York: Oxford University Press, 1937.

### Works Consulted

- Alexandre, Arsene and M.H. Spielman, H.C. Bunner and August Jaccaci. The Modern Poster.  
New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1895.
- Flanagan, Hallie. Arena: The History of the Federal Theatre. Bronx: Benjamin Blom, Inc.,  
1965.
- Hillier, Bevis. Posters. New York: Stein and Day, 1969.
- Hutchison, Harold F. The Poster: An Illustrated History from 1860. New York: The Viking  
Press, 1968.
- O'Conner, Francis V., ed. The New Deal Art Projects: An Anthology of Memoirs. Washington:  
Smithsonian Institution Press, 1972.
- Richmond, Leonard, ed. The Technique of the Poster. London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, Ltd.,  
1933
- Rogers, Ernesto N. Encyclopedia of World Art. London: McGraw-Hill, 1963.
- Rowland, Anna. Bauhaus Source Book: Bauhaus Style and Its Worldwide Influence. New  
York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1990.
- Wingler, Hans, ed. Graphic Work from the Bauhaus. Greenwich: New York Graphic Society,  
Ltd., 1965.